



Ambassador Tatiana C. Gfoeller

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Thank you all for coming today to celebrate this wonderful occasion. I am very proud that the American Embassy and the American government are able to support this program to help with the moral rehabilitation of the young basketball players and coach who survived the tragic air catastrophe last August. We all hope that it will be a positive and memorable experience for the team and a symbol of the friendship between the American and Kyrgyz peoples.

The idea for the trip was proposed by my friend Aleksandr Voinov last November. We had worked successfully with him and the Agency on Physical Culture, Sports, Youth Policy and the Protection of Children on the visit of State Department Sports Envoy and NBA legend Sam Perkins that August. During that visit, Sam Perkins and University of Louisville coach Becky Bonner conducted master classes in Bishkek, Kant and Kochkor and met several members of this team.

I thought the idea was a great way to show America's support for the Kyrgyz nation and the ability of sports to bring people together, even in the face of tragedy. So we arranged for the group to participate in a State Department Sports Envoy program to visit America for 10 days and see how basketball and sports lift the spirit of America. The trip is financed and arranged jointly by the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the National Basketball Association and the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

The group, consisting of nine people-- seven boys and two coaches-- will leave on Saturday the 21st for Washington, DC. There they will attend a Washington Wizards NBA game, participate in basketball master classes and workshops on health, and play against young American basketball players. The group will then travel to Indianapolis, Indiana, where Sam Perkins is the Vice President of the Indiana Pacers. They will participate in more master classes, attend a Pacers game, attend the March Madness university basketball tournament, and visit the NCAA hall of fame.

In America, sports are a shared cultural passion that can bring people together across the divisions of geography, race, gender and religion. They are a powerful source of national pride, but at the same time convey mutual respect and help improve international understanding when we play by the same rules and learn about each other. For these reasons, the American government sponsors about 14 Sports Visitors programs like this one a year, bringing groups to the States to create bonds with American athletes. Recent examples include baseball players from Latin America, weightlifters from Iran and soccer players from Morocco.

I know that this group will learn a lot about basketball and America during this trip, and that they will teach Americans about Kyrgyzstan at the same time. But I truly hope that they will return to Kyrgyzstan and share their experiences. We hope to work with them, and with leaders like Baktiir Kadyrov and Aleksandr Husseinovich to build a culture of sports here. We want Kyrgyzstan to win more Olympic medals, and we want all citizens to play sports and receive the self-respect, the good health, the sense of discipline, and the respect for rules and fair play that sports give.

Unfortunately, I have to leave for another event, but I look forward to hearing about this trip. My advisor on education, culture and sports, Michael Rosenthal, can answer any questions that you might have. Thank you and good luck!